

## The meanings and usages of “ethnicization”:

### Ethnic social relations from a majoritarian perspective

Hélène BERTHELEU

What is the meaning of the “ethnicization of social relationships”, a French neologism that has flourished since appearing just a few years ago? Almost as remarkable as its popularity in France is its complete absence in the Anglo-Saxon world and in French-speaking areas like Quebec. Given the extent to which Europe and North America communicate about migration and immigration, interethnic relationships, cultural diversity policy and the fight against discrimination, how do we explain this curious phenomenon? This article will attempt to contextualize the expression and clarify its “social” meanings, its scientific merit and its theoretical and ideological implications. A recent expression that seems to have first surfaced in 1995, it is tempting to pigeonhole “ethnicization” as a mere by-product of “ethnicity”. But upon closer examination, we find that actual usage of the term short-circuits a hasty reading and prompts us to trace both the genealogy of the expression and the conditions under which it emerged.

In contrast to the notion of ethnicization, the concept of ethnicity has been the object of theoretical exploration in a number of countries for the past thirty years. Beginning in the 1970s, North American sociologists and anthropologists progressively molded the concept into a means of describing social situations characterized by interethnic relationships seen from a dynamic, constructivist perspective<sup>1</sup>. Basing their work for the most part on the early writings of Max Weber<sup>2</sup>, these scholars developed ethnicity into a notion that is no longer essentialist or substantialist<sup>3</sup> and by doing so allowed us to discover both the objective and subjective aspects of the relationships between ethnic groups. Far from focusing exclusively on the cultural dimensions of interethnic social relationships, their findings turn our attention to how ethnic relations interface with class and gender relations. These findings also underline the heuristic potential of the concept due to its transversal nature, that is, the idea that ethnic relations, however cultural they may seem, are also intrinsically economic and political.

Although several French-speaking authors have produced excellent work on this topic<sup>4</sup>, theoretical development of the concept of ethnicity has not seen as much success in France as abroad<sup>5</sup>. Regardless of the value of the new questions that the concept of ethnicity makes it possible for us to ask, historical and political factors have long caused the concept to be ignored if not rejected outright. Without elaborating on the underlying context of this

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<sup>1</sup> See especially E.C.W. Isajiw (1974), N. Glazer, D.P. Moynihan (1975), and Roosens (1989).

<sup>2</sup> See Elke Winter’s summary (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Among French-language materials, the writings of Canadian Danielle Juteau (1999) and Belgian Albert Bastenier (2004) are especially insightful.

<sup>4</sup> See P. Poutignat and J. Streiff-Fenart (1995) and their translation of the pioneering research of F. Barth (1969). See also D. Juteau (1999), V. de Rudder et al. (2000), P.J. Simon (1970, 1993, 1997), M. Martiniello (1995) and more recently V. Geisser (1998) and A. Boubeker (2003).

<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the inclusion of the term in the names of laboratories or in the titles of research programs can be revealing. Among francophone countries, it appears frequently in Belgium and in Quebec but hardly ever in France.

phenomenon, let us recall that in the 1990s, numerous intellectuals, researchers, journalists, and community social workers insisted on the need to resist fragmentation and the “Americanization” or “balkanization” of French society. As they denounced the increasing number of distinctions and special features, the concept of ethnicity became embroiled in a political turmoil so closely linked to the question of national identity<sup>6</sup> that rejecting the concept was seen as the means to buoy up flagging republican, universal values. As authors such as F. Lorcerie (1994) and V. Geisser (1999) have suggested, this situation caused and continues to cause the scientific community to pay little attention to issues associated with ethnic differentiation. The dearth of scientific analysis left the question of ethnicity to be largely defined by the discourse on social and political practices (Boubeker, 2003).

It is the aim of this paper to distance ourselves from this view of ethnicity, a view directly informed by the wish to diagnose so-called “sensitive” situations and implement or evaluate public policy. Imbued with a concern for public order and population management, it is an approach that reflects a majoritarian view<sup>7</sup> of situations, relations and norms. Our goal, in contrast, is to understand, simultaneously and as part of the same dynamic, not one but several perspectives and to examine how they reflect the social divisions, classification and frontiers of which they are the product.

After being neglected by the French scientific community for so many years, then, the term “ethnicity” is now making way for the term “ethnicization”. The most reliable French studies on this question have defined ethnicization as the process in which ethnic categorizations emerge in real-life situations in France (Poutignat and Streiff-Fénart, 1995; De Rudder, 1995; Palomares, 2005). “Ethnicization” is thus frequently used to describe and understand conflicts involving population groups of immigrant origin, conflicts that often take place in schools, in neighbourhoods, in buses, at public service counters and in the workplace. But in becoming thus generalized, the meaning of the expression seems to have shifted.

## 1. THE “FRANK” SUCCESS OF A NEW EXPRESSION

Our inquiry begins with an investigation of the rapid rise in popularity of this new term. At first glance, “ethnicization” seems a derivative of the concept of ethnicity. But it also has roots in the term “ethnie”, a word that has come to be denigrated and abandoned by researchers including ethnologists who now prefer “ethnic group”. The concept of ethnic groups as it is understood by most researchers today can be traced to the paradigm of ethnic boundaries developed by Fredrik Barth (1969), a paradigm that has been widely adopted by anthropologists and sociologists alike. What is unusual about the current situation in France is that “ethnie” is now unheard of and “ethnicity” is barely used, whereas “ethnicization” captivates most if not all those who write on the question. Why has “ethnicity” been rejected and not “ethnicization”? One answer could be that despite the obvious semantic proximity of the two terms, the users of those terms consider the distinction of meaning between them to be dramatic enough to require separate terminology.

But another explanation is also compelling. Could it be that the success of “ethnicization” lies precisely in the fact that it allows users to *avoid* the concept of ethnicity, despite the theoretical research that has given ethnicity such a solid basis? If this is the case, we must identify the theoretical or ideological reasons that researchers, journalists, elected officials, urban planners, executives of large companies and others all make the same semantic choice, for it is by understanding their motivations that we can establish the heuristic

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<sup>6</sup> The question of national identity has tremendous influence in France. In the 1990s, this influence crystallized in the French model of integration that sought as much to qualify past processes as to assert how things should be done going forward.

<sup>7</sup> In the sociological meaning of the term “majoritarian” as defined by C. Guillaumin (2002, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1972).

(or non-heuristic) nature of this neologism. Do usages of “ethnicization” represent a new and original view of interethnic relations or are they rather an admission of the degree to which the concept of ethnicity remains vague if not shunned in France? Our present inquiry quickly brings us face-to-face with the uniquely French difficulty of conceiving interethnic relations from a sociological viewpoint. Indeed we will see that the expression promotes a certain shifting and sliding between theoretical and ideological positions that has thrived particularly well in the French milieu.

We are not alone in raising this issue. Several scholars do likewise when they remark upon the difficulty of using the notion of ethnicization without a clear definition of its meaning. In his introduction to a research program on the subject, Jean-Paul Payet (2007) stressed the necessity of clarifying the social usages of “ethnicity”: “Whoever undertakes to review the literature on the ethnicization of social relations (especially in the field of education) is quickly confronted by an epistemological problem, namely that in France, the category of ethnicity is a recent construction. It is therefore necessary to determine what research and institutional jargons mean when they use this category”.

Our present goal therefore is to do just that, in order to go beyond semantic and ideological facets and clarify the social processes that underlie various usages of the new term. To this end, we selected approximately forty texts written by a range of authors and published either in scientific journals or in the written or electronic press between 2000 and 2006. The authors<sup>8</sup> whose work we selected fell into four categories with little or no overlap. The first category consists of francophone social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists from France and, less frequently, from Belgium), some of whom were specialists in the matter. The second category consists of editors of weekly publications and journalists writing for written dailies. The third category is the hardest to define. It includes intellectuals, stakeholders, activists, elected officials—in short, political actors working individually or as representatives of movements and parties or else occupying some particular social or political position. The final category is made up of individuals personally recounting their professional practices in companies, social work or urban management.

Our study was exploratory in nature and did not attempt to exhaustively inventory all usages of the new expression. Nor did it endeavor to enumerate its occurrence in the different categories of authors/texts: the categories were only finalized once the material was actually collected. Rather it aimed to identify the most frequent usages in the selected material, note the diversity or homogeneity of those usages and paint a valid semantic portrait. We will see that differences between categories of authors/texts were not central to the differentiation of usages. While we uncovered a variety of semantic connotations, what was most striking was the consistent nebulosity of the meanings attributed to the terms by a range of authors. These meanings were repeatedly characterized by shifts and slides: from scientific logic to a more normative “social” position, from a more normative “social” position to a political application that occasionally referred to experts on the subject (considered an important one) or appropriated the term for the development of public policies that would take ethnic inequality into better account.

## 2. EXPOSING THE CATEGORIZATION PROCESS

Analysis of the texts we selected soon disclosed a close relationship between the ideas of ethnicization and categorization<sup>9</sup>. The journalist who deplored “the ethnicization of the

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<sup>8</sup> We prefer that these authors remain anonymous in order to retain the focus on their material and the meanings expressed therein. The authors’ status, particularly their professional status, is sometimes relevant to our analysis but other times is not.

<sup>9</sup> Social categorization involves two groups of individuals: those who designate and must agree on how to make their designations, and those who are designated and in general have no choice to be

student-teacher relationship” in schools; the job training officer who expressed concern over “the ethnicization of professional relationships in the social work sector”; the *contrat de ville*<sup>10</sup> bureaucrat who denounced “the ethnicization of relationships” among dwellers of the suburbs (the *banlieue*): in all cases, we witnessed usages whose meaning approximated “the salience of ethnic categories”. Similarly, but a little further back in time, pioneer Jean-Paul Payet described the modes of ethnic categorization he observed in schools and did not hesitate to qualify identity-seeking dynamics in terms of ethnicity, “a dimension of social identity and classification in the school environment that actors especially evoke” in times of conflict (Payet, 1997).

Processes of ethnic categorization account for a significant portion of the phenomena explored by sociology, especially the sociology of identity creation and the devastating subjective effects of stigmatization. This body of research describes the construction of negative identity (individual and collective constructions of invisibility, shame, personal or collective rage, self-destructive behaviour, etc.) that mainly occurs when categorizations are strongly asymmetrical or unequal. More rarely, the research portrays the construction of positive identity built on a less asymmetrical basis at the price of a process of identification and differentiation.

And yet these analyses seem engrossed if not monopolized by multiple manifestations of the process of categorization to the point that they neglect to so much as mention other processes, like communalization (Weber, 1922; Juteau, 1999; Winter, 2005; Billion, 2007) and majority/minority relations (Guillaumin, 1972; Pietrantonio, 2001), that either concern more than categorization or do not concern it at all. And yet these phenomena merit our full attention because they allow us to understand how new ethnic boundaries emerge and how groups and individuals act to transform or (re)produce social distinctions. The theoretical framework proposed by the experts on these phenomena (see Guillaumin in particular) also allows us to investigate the effect of majoritarian versus minoritarian status on the individuation process experienced by all of us, whichever side of the ethnic boundary we happen to be on. Recent theoretical developments in the United States, Canada and Belgium have shown that ethnicity is never just the product of ethnic categorization, regardless of whether categorization takes place in the context of explicit public policy, as in Canada, or whether it occurs more implicitly in day-to-day interactions and relationships, as in France. It is clear, then, that a superficial vision of ethnic relations (doubtless the only vision compatible with the uniquely French way of obscuring the issue) undermines the theoretical potential of ethnicity.

These remarks are not intended to downplay the significance of ethnic categorization as far as social relations and the construction of groups and identity in France is concerned. Rather we wish to point out that an incomplete development of this analysis is likely to detract from the formulation of an impartial and comprehensive approach to the phenomenon of ethnicity. By impartial and comprehensive, we mean an approach that (1) refuses to reduce ethnic social relations to the ethnic categorization observed in social interactions and (2) avoids interpreting minorities’ affirmation of their ethnic identity as nothing more than a reaction to categorization by the dominant group.

### 3. ETHNICIZATION OR DIMINISHING THE THEORETICAL POTENTIAL OF ETHNICITY

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designated or not. Depending on the case, acceptance of one’s designation can be voluntary or involuntary, spontaneous or forced: the objective balance of power obliges the powerless party to acquiesce. See C. Guillaumin (1972).

<sup>10</sup> A *contrat de ville* is a social territorial contract between different levels of government aimed at improving consistency in government policies in areas such as culture, education, and infrastructure.

**Commentaire [J1]** : Je te propose une note en bas de page pour expliquer ce que c’est un contrat de ville dans le context français. J’ai tiré mon explication d’ici: [www.cjc-online.ca/include/getdoc.php?id=751&article=726&mode=pdf](http://www.cjc-online.ca/include/getdoc.php?id=751&article=726&mode=pdf)

Our review of social scientists' usage of the term "ethnicization" in the material we selected revealed a recurring fear of reaching an impasse. One sociologist warned against "the dangers of the wholesale ethnicization of the social realm" while another presaged "an utterly ethnicized interpretation of reality" and a political scientist cautioned against "ethnicizing our study of the political environment". Exactly what is meant by "the wholesale ethnicization of the social realm"? That the researcher's lens could be clouded by an entirely "ethnicized" vision of the world? In other words, that he or she could fall prey to seeing ethnicity everywhere, even where there might be little ethnicity or none? But is gauging the significance of ethnicity in a given situation really what we are trying to do?

Along the same lines, but adopting a more active tone, a psychologist advocated "resisting ethnicization" while a political scientist deplored "the runaway ethnicization of interactions and the resulting discrimination". Implicitly or explicitly, most social science writings developed the idea that ethnicization consists of "obscuring the reality of social cleavages". Most journalists also urged us to be on our guard: "Are we going to let them ethnicize the bar brawl?" asked one after what he considered a mere street fight was regarded by a colleague as an act of anti-Semitism. Much discussion took an even more militant tone: one writing asserted incompatibility between republican ideals and the "ethnicization of the social realm" while another, written by the leader of an antiracist movement, urged readers to rise up against this "new form of the dominant ideology" and a third, posted on a radical militant website, declared itself "against world ethnicization". Insofar as elected officials were concerned, the expression was little used by members of traditional parties but was repeatedly referenced by activists and independent representatives, who decried ethnicization along the same lines as the authors cited above ("ethnicization is the petrification of social relations", wrote an activist in a report submitted to the government). In contrast to these authors, a few lone voices argued for a more pragmatic consideration of ethnic and racial discrimination. This was the case of a company executive who gave the matter a positive spin: "In my view, the ethnicization of companies is a good thing". With this statement, the writer was not approving the process of stigmatization or categorization through successive social interactions, as documented by E. Goffman, but was rather campaigning for better recognition and assessment of ethnic diversity within the workplace so as to identify and hopefully counter discrimination at the source.

Thus warned of "the dangers of the wholesale ethnicization of the social realm", we could react by striking a theoretical balance between an overly ethnicized reading and the rejection of ethnicity pure and simple. But while the moderation of this idea is appealing, it lacks a methodological foundation: how does one "measure" ethnicity without either exaggerating or underestimating its structuring capacity? To draw an analogy to feminist epistemology as understood today in the social sciences<sup>11</sup>, can we assert that the role of sociology is to find the right dose of feminism beyond which we succumb to ideology? It is obvious that the question should be asked differently. The idea of striking a theoretical balance speaks more to the discomfort that the concept of ethnicity evokes in France than it does of a scientifically justified compromise. By embracing the idea that the researcher's job is to follow a middle road (neither too much "ethnicization" that would obstruct an objective view of reality nor the complete denial of ethnic phenomena), we give way and thereby take part in the mixing of political and scientific vocabularies—something from which we are trying to distance ourselves. We do not suggest that sociologists pay no heed to French readers' reluctance to discuss ethnicity or that they ignore the larger question of how society receives research projects in general. But it appears difficult to assess the potential of a concept when its scientific usages are exclusively determined by political prudence. This

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<sup>11</sup> At the 2007 Congress of the *Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement des sciences*, a consortium of four Canadian universities held a sociology symposium entitled "Feminist Epistemology and Social Differentiation".

position also precludes us from challenging an increasingly alarmist vision of ethnicity as a pathological dimension of social relations.

#### 4. ETHNICIZATION AS A PATHOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

Emile Durkheim was the first to distinguish the normal from the pathological (1889). Durkheim argued that social phenomena considered by society to be pathological, like crime and suicide, are in fact “normal” or ordinary phenomena, that is to say, phenomena that occur in all societies. Without going too far in the analogy with deviance and crime<sup>12</sup>, we should recall that one of the fundamental principles of sociology is the difference between social problems and sociological problems. Initially rejected as a purely American “social problem”, ethnicity was next discarded as a sociological perspective that could not be applied in France. Its present incarnation seems to be in the form of ethnicization, an embarrassing pathological phenomenon that marks French society, threatens social relations and spreads like gangrene in underprivileged urban areas long spared contamination.

In the wake of the sociology of social movements, several authors have hypothesized that the ethnicization of French society in a post-industrial world in crisis is proof of the failure of the French model of integration, a reaction to social and urban exclusion, the sign of an anomic society and of profound social dysfunction due to a breakdown in the “normal” social process of integration. The media also commonly evoke the simplified idea of the crisis of industrial society leading to social phenomena or rather social “problems” that we have classified under the term “exclusion”, causing people to fight back or take refuge in ethnic withdrawal and ethnic tensions and explaining the slippery slope to ethnicization. The expressions we encountered in our literature review were lucid in their evocations of danger in the way of a trap or a dormant illness waiting to erupt<sup>13</sup>. Take for example this excerpt written by a sociologist: “the temptation of ethnicity in schools has long been latent, and changes in society and the education system have stirred it into life”. Further on: “The education system is making greater and greater use of ethnic categories, and schools are increasingly transforming social and school relations into ethnic relations”.

#### 5. REDUCING SOCIAL ETHNIC RELATIONS TO CLASS RELATIONS

Directly or indirectly, the term “ethnicization” thus suggests a divergence from the natural evolution of social interactions, a pathological mutation of “normal” social relations, meaning class relations. Whether at school, in the community or at work, a group or an individual who expresses his or her disagreement or opposition by virtue of a collective “ethnic” identity will have his or her reasoning judged unsubstantiated, misleading<sup>14</sup> or outright dangerous, because it is perilously near the brink of culturalism, essentialism or, worse, masked neo-racism.

In neo-Marxist approaches like Hechter’s (1976), researchers are mainly interested in the mobilizing potential of ethnicity in the context of relations that may first appear to be “ethnic” relations but on a deeper level are actually class relations. While this matter is open

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<sup>12</sup> This analogy is a slippery slope if ever there was one and risks confronting us despite our will with a reality that is very much a part of present-day life: the amalgamation of criminality and immigration or what some have called “the criminalization of immigration”. See Salvatore Pallida (1999).

<sup>13</sup> Our reading of this phenomenon is shared by numerous experts on racism who deplore the fact that so many consider racism a disorder or a theme to be mobilized in times of crisis instead of studying the social relations that actually inform racial discourse. See Réa (1998) and Bastenier (2004).

<sup>14</sup> The idea of ethnic identity as a naïve or even dangerous illusion was the credo of most Marxist theorists of ethnic relations and was later shared by French sociology as a whole. This idea was profoundly influenced by the preponderance of the “Social Question” in French history.

to debate<sup>15</sup>, several scholars now believe that ethnic social relations are just as transversal as class and gender relations, and that they interact with other kind of relations while remaining distinct. Let us briefly take the example of schools, deplored in numerous newspaper articles as having become the setting for ethnicization phenomena. Led by P. Bourdieu, sociologists have long underlined the significance of the social or “class” dimension of an education system whose ethnic dimension has now also been recognized (Lorcerie, 2003). In the light of the history of French schools, French secularism and the egalitarian mission that the French Republic entrusted to the national education system at its inception, actors in the field of education have no choice but to regard class, gender and ethnic inequality as dysfunctional. But what can a sociologist with a descriptive and analytical perspective consider “abnormal”? Can s/he be truly surprised by the fact that the unequal social relations that characterize society are also present in schools? We now know that inequalities not only exist in the classroom but are in fact produced there, within complex interethnic relationships that ban us from indicting any single player, be it students and their migrant families, teachers and their pedagogy or the way that the education system itself is organized. Schools are not and have never been sheltered from any kind of social classification; indeed we would be hard put to explain why the porosity of the education system relates to class and gender relations alone. As early as the 1980s, a significant body of “intercultural” research revealed new questioning taking place within schools on this subject and sociologists (most notably J.-P. Payet) undertook to describe interethnic relations in detail. But this worldview has long remained marginal.

Nowadays, however, classifications such as these are being partially (and not impartially) rediscovered as a new form of domination that *should not* exist in France. We are not far from blaming the United States for this as for so many other things!<sup>16</sup> But the truth is that migrant children have long been as “invisible”<sup>17</sup> in schools as their migrant parents have been in so many other spheres of social life. Doubtless what is new today are the statements or actions of those whose minority status once had them relegated to the background, confined to a “polite” attitude or restricted to an overly scripted role. Without going into the riots of November 2005<sup>18</sup>, we can interpret the increasing number of micro-conflicts in past years (demands, protests, acts of resistance and disruptions of the public order)<sup>19</sup> as a means of constructing relations or even as a positive form of socialization, as G. Simmel (1995, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1912) suggested when he wrote that conflict is not only inherent to social life but in one way contributes to its growth and development. The language of conflict also allows its speakers to adopt distinct positions and, in so doing, agree on their respective right to exist

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<sup>15</sup> Danielle Juteau reproduces part of the anglophone debate in French, including for example the work of D. Stasiulis (1990) who adopts a Marxist position and refutes the existence of ethnic and racial relations, referring their study to the study of ideologies.

<sup>16</sup> The scientific version of this position has, furthermore, helped to fuel the virulent rhetoric of the anti-American “communitarianist” or “multiculturalist” model, which in the 1990s was used to shore up France’s own model of integration.

<sup>17</sup> See P. Williams (1982). In addition, A. Sayad (1999) provides a good description of the way immigrant workers in the 1950s to 1980 were enjoined to social, economic and political “politeness”, an injunction that continues to humiliate the next generation.

<sup>18</sup> A. Réa (2006) has an interesting analysis of these events. For one thing, he compares French sociologists’ strictly socio-economic interpretation of the riots to the ethnic interpretation favoured by Belgian, British and American sociologists, who nonetheless acknowledged the social conditions that underlay the conflicts. For another thing, Réa remarks on the extent to which French sociologists under-estimated the political aspect of the riots and indeed the institutional dimension of interethnic relations that is of particular interest to us here.

<sup>19</sup> Most conflicts in the school environment take place between parents and teachers and center around the school’s orientation and the wearing of the hidjab. In the urban environment, many conflicts revolve around the use of public spaces but cannot be attributed to any one trigger.

and express their views. The most common outcome of this kind of situation is that the majority loses its uncontested monopoly over the discourse and can no longer get away with merely considering or “taking into account” (to use its own former language) phenomena such as inequalities in schools or social injustice towards minoritized groups. A good proportion of micro-conflicts can thus be regarded as the manifestation of new agency on the part of minorities who to everyone’s surprise show they are able to act and not just react and demonstrate inventiveness and creativity as participants at the very heart of interethnic relations. This interpretation departs from the petrified images of poor and “deparented” families and of the young victims of discrimination so beloved by the press, except of course whenever these images are suddenly and brutally flipped around to depict the erstwhile victims as enraged and destructive rioters<sup>20</sup>.

Far from freeing us from this cumbersome interpretation, then, class reductionism that views interethnic relations as yet another manifestation of class relations actually fuels sociologism and a simplistic vision of domination.

## 6. FREEING OURSELVES FROM ESSENTIALISM?

Sociological analyses of ethnic categorization are often an opportunity to denounce the essentializing or naturalizing activity that accompanies the categorization process. Stability appears to be a substantial property of all forms of categorization<sup>21</sup> and C. Guillaumin has shown that the strength and stability of ethnic and racial categorization, like gender categorization, is founded on the idea of nature (Guillaumin, 2002 (1972), 1992). This device permits us to definitively classify individuals in groups so stable that we easily presume heredity from one generation to the next. As a result, French scholars have frequently rejected the concept of ethnicity on the grounds that it is a theoretical regression that drags us back to a fixed vision of culture, to a substantialist and essentialist approach to ethnic groups, to all the pitfalls that anthropologists have worked so hard so avoid in recent decades. But if this is the case, why has the term “ethnicization” sidestepped this logic and avoided similar rejection?

More than anything else, the answer lies in the word’s ending in “tion”. This grammatical construct suggests a process, an ongoing fabrication or construction (an artifact) of ethnic categories that is more evident in the word “ethnicization” than in the word “ethnicity”, commonly defined as an ethno-cultural dimension proper to an individual or a group. This rejection of “ethnicity” in favour of “ethnicization” could thus be a precaution adopted by researchers intent on avoiding the risk of essentialization. But their prudence flouts a large body of North American sociological research that has debated the subject at length. The context was different in North America, where the social sciences had to distance themselves from a broad social and political definition of the notion of ethnicity. But North American scholars succeeded in moving past widely held primordialist interpretations of the term, interpretations that assigned ethnic attachments and saw them as strong, primary, irrational, unchosen; interpretations that held that all individuals are involuntarily and unconsciously subject to a group identity. Other scholars, more culturalist in their approach (Isajiw, 1972), pursued the idea of unchosen cultural links before arriving at today’s idea of socially and historically constructed links (Juteau, 1999) that are frequently instrumentalized (Glazer & Co, 1975; Hechter, 1978) but are never completely dissociated from historical and cultural productions.

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<sup>20</sup> This is of course a caricature but we will leave the task of deciphering popular press stereotypes to others. With respect to the crisis of November 2005, for example, Pierre Billion’s analysis (2005) runs counter to the media’s portrayal of angry young descendants of immigrants living in the *banlieues* who abruptly attacked private and public property.

<sup>21</sup> A social category that proves to be fluid or ephemeral loses its power to classify.



In France, in contrast, the discomfort inspired by ethnicity continues to be palpable in a variety of publications. Authors' fears of inadvertently referring to essentialized relations or identities translate into the recurrent use of quotation marks and expressions (witness the ever-popular "so-called ethnic phenomena") that imply how erroneous would be an ethnic interpretation of a given situation. But what are the authors really trying to avoid: an "ethnic" interpretation—i.e., an interpretation that refers to the existence of interethnic relations—or an "ethnist" or "culturalist" interpretation, that is, an interpretation that succumbs to the allure of culture-essence often held up by the spokespeople of minority groups or even by those of majority groups who feel that their cultural references are being devalued or are under attack? Whenever the author uses the precaution of quotation marks, s/he is assuming that culture and ethnicity or even essence and ethnicity are one and the same: precisely the position we wish to avoid. In this confusion, "ethnicity" is nothing more than a (poor) substitute for "cultural" or "racial" in an approach that has fallen prey to what A. Bastenier (2004) calls "the culturalist definition of culture".

With the word "ethnicization", then, the user follows in the wake of a constructivist approach to ethnicity without assuming its theoretical heritage. A mere precaution? Not if the result is to reject sociological theorizing on ethnicity and cut French thinking off from the international debate on the subject. Everywhere else, researchers labour to understand ethnic phenomena for what they are, namely, historically constructed unequal social relations. In France, however, we frequently persist in equating the issue of ethnicity with an essentialist view of social reality devoid of all heuristic value.

## 7. ETHNICITY VERSUS NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Behind what appears to be a scientific precaution, the Gallic success of the term "ethnicization" betrays a host of concerns, the most notable of which is the fear of lost ground and "pathologized" relations, as if ethnic phenomena constituted a threat to "society" which in this case is none other than the nation<sup>22</sup>.

In reality, this pathologization of ethnic phenomena corresponds to a narrow definition of citizenship as expressed by the paradigm of integration that holds that civic identity, which in France is none other than national identity, would materialize naturally if social relations were not "disrupted" by an archaic form of belonging to which none of us should give in: neither members of minority groups nor members of majority groups and, even less so, researchers. "Ethnicization" is seen and construed as a social dysfunction, an unfortunate process that surfaces in times of crisis and in some ways perverts social relations that are actually economical in nature and should have been expressed more clearly through the political process. We mistakenly believe that social relations are ethnic only on a superficial level and as the consequence of decline, in the same way that the public (albeit weak) expression of minority groups is only ethnic (i.e. cultural or religious) because it does not know how to be or cannot be political. When espoused by sociology, this approach runs a high risk of producing the strange "sociology without an actor" denounced by A. Boubeker (2003).

Other concerns brought up by the ethnicization of social relations is the fear of the return of racist ideas of the Other (stirring memories of Nazi crimes already kept well alive in France) or, more simply, the fear that today's Republic could become "fragmented", the national "model" crumbling within the context of a fragile Europe. There is also the apprehension of public disruptions and violence fueled by inequalities of all kinds. Faced with these worries, elected officials on all sides have attempted to reassure the population and

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<sup>22</sup> C. Rinaudo expresses this idea as follows: "We cannot reduce ethnicity to a reactive or pathogenic manifestation to a society suffering from anomie. We must attempt to extract ourselves from the issue of integration and study ethnicity from all angles" (2000).

“construct” the question of immigration on a political and mostly discursive basis<sup>23</sup>. Meanwhile, social scientists striving to understand their research subject scientifically<sup>24</sup> have struggled to build objectivity around this question and promote a less normative and more symmetrical outlook.

## 8. UNDERSTANDING ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONS SYMMETRICALLY

We can further our understanding of ethnic social relations by looking at research on controversies, especially the principle of symmetry as developed in the sociology of science (D. Bloor, 1976; D. Vinck, 1995: 105). The analytical framework and the objectivity of this principle can be applied to the sociology of interethnic relations to describe majority and minority groups through the lens of their interplay: what each says or does not say, what each does or abstains from doing, and so on. The goal is not just to contrast the political weight of one group versus the cultural characteristics of the other. Too much research has been content to compare the ways of life and the representations of the minority, on one hand, to the implementation of public policies that supposedly capture the majority’s determination to promote allegedly universal values, on the other. This perspective fails to plumb the dialectic that links the two groups and the extent to which the practices and representations of one group might be a reaction to the practices and representations of the other. Majority groups have been mainly studied by political scientists and legal scholars, who investigate and frequently legitimize the social universe of those who have the power to dictate the norms<sup>25</sup>, while minority groups have been principally scrutinized by sociologists, anthropologists and that branch of the social sciences known abroad as subaltern studies, whose lengthy cultural or even culturalist descriptions seem designed to compensate for the political inexistence of “communities”. Efforts to invert the gaze do exist, however, with some scholars suggesting an anthropology of the mainstream (Abélès, 2005; Neveu, 2005; Pietrantonio, 2004) and others developing a political sociology of minorities (Breton, 1991; Geisser, 1998; Lorcerie, 2003; Kokoreff, 2004; Martucelli, 2001). These initiatives have been successful in uncovering the social mechanisms that support “everyday acts of domination”; they have also revealed the multiple forms of action that minorities take (engagement, protest, resistance, empowerment, and so on) and unearthed ethnicities and examples of communalization unsuspected by the majoritarian group. The procedures of these rare studies are heuristic precisely because they sidestep both miserabilism and populism; it is no coincidence that their refusal to validate the norm allows them to evaluate interethnic relationships without over-interpreting them. But their approach is the exception rather than the rule and has sparked public controversy.

Adoption of an intentionally relational sociology of ethnicity, then, allows us to better understand the experience and the agency<sup>26</sup> of members of minoritized groups conceptualized

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<sup>23</sup> France took measures to address the issue of foreigners residing in the country (especially those seeking asylum) in 2003 and 2005 but these measures did not include the social and cultural treatment of population groups whose origins lie in post-colonial migration because treatment of these populations comes under the purview of territorialized policies on social and urban matters (although this has never been actually specified).

<sup>24</sup> We do not propose to give way to scientific language and set up a futile contest between the political and the scientific: we are cognizant that each informs the other. But the two disciplines do not follow the same procedure. As Éric Fassin wrote so well when asked about the social and political usages of science, “The task of the social sciences is to describe the world. It’s a simple enough suggestion but if taken seriously, its impacts will be significant. It means that we can never assume a priori that any given thing does not exist.” *Vacarme*, spring 2000, <http://www.vacarme.eu.org/article31.html>.

<sup>25</sup> See Danièle Lochack (1989) on the scientific and political involvement of jurists under the Vichy regime.

<sup>26</sup> In the cognitive sciences, the term “agency” refers to the experience of being the instigator and controller of one’s actions rather than being subjected to outside forces. For a usage of the term very

as actors and not merely the victims of ethnic relations. But it also frees us to analyze the majoritarian group and its diverse means of expression and action, including the State (both the administration and public policy), as the ethnic actor it sometimes is and not merely as an impartial party insofar as ethnicity is concerned. Only this perspective properly considers majority/minority groups as entities that shape one another and are both authors of the relationships that link and the boundaries that separate them.

This issue is important in France, where the rhetoric of ethnicization seems to have confined sociologists to an approach that perpetuates the blindness of the majoritarian group. Ethnicity is more than a product of categorization and domination, and the belief that acts of categorization by the majority<sup>27</sup> constitute the entire foundation of a minority's ethnicity is typically majoritarian reasoning (Juteau, 1999). Even those members of the majoritarian group who have accepted that they are partners in a specific social relationship continue to subscribe to the idea that minorities only appear and exist when classified as such by the majoritarian group. This explains why ethnic identities are neither seen nor are they always studied for what they are and what they produce (new forms of communalization and engagement in public spaces, for example) but rather for the social rank they confer on those who assert that identity. Numerous studies have shown how alienating is modern-day categorization and how discriminatory are many of the institutional structures of the majoritarian group. But while it is undeniable that these studies highlight an important facet of social ethnic relations, they pass over other facets and in so doing reduce ethnicity to the equivalent of a stigma that the luckiest victims are able to "turn around" and make into the emblem of an essentially oppositional identity. Thus amputated of all the symbolic cultural productions that constitute ethnicity in most situations, ethnicity becomes nothing more than an identity assigned by acts of minorization, discrimination and urban stigmatization<sup>28</sup>.

Not only are ethnic phenomena not all about discrimination or, more generally, about racist social contacts<sup>29</sup>, it would be a great error to conclude by attributing them to the perception of the majoritarian group alone. But events today suggest that long decades of obscuring ethnic phenomena in France have given way to a partial and asymmetrical understanding of ethnic phenomena by a majoritarian group convinced that it and it alone is responsible for certain segments of the population having been marked as distinct.

This asymmetrical perspective rejects the agency of minority groups and implicitly dismisses the complex nature of ethnic phenomena as they have been studied over the last

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close to our own, see the thesis of L. Pietrantonio (1999). Pietrantonio defines agency as the taking of action in a social setting; the capacity to act within one's environment and transform and master that environment, as opposed to the passive and powerless position of one who is "acted upon" by others or by his/her environment.

<sup>27</sup> Speaking of the majority in the singular in this context may seem a misuse of language, but our intent is to refer to the ideal type of a majority and not to a particular individual. It is important to recognize that not all members of the majority group occupy the same position and therefore do not all have the same power to name, to designate, and to categorize. Recent research has shown that public policies play an important role in social categorization (witness the waves of categorization instigated within the framework of the *Revenu minimum d'insertion (RMI)*, France's welfare benefit for residents whose income and assets are inferior to a certain amount). And yet we should not disregard historically established categories such as that of the French *immigré* (immigrant). These categories first circulated in economic circles (especially among managers recruiting abroad after the war) before spreading to the rest of society.

<sup>28</sup> The recent history of French urban sociology confirms this approach. The 1980s and 1990s were rife with "dangerous liaisons" between urban specialists and the advocates of a securitization approach to immigration. See H. Bertheleu (2002).

<sup>29</sup> Most specialists assert the contrary: that racism is just one of many manifestations of interethnic relations.

several decades<sup>30</sup>, namely, the ways in which both parties construct ethnic boundaries that are rooted in history but are also continually transformed under the influence of economic, cultural and political forces which themselves undergo continual change.

#### 10. THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONS OF WHICH INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS ARE COMPOSED

In contrast to what this distrust of the supposedly pathological phenomenon of ethnicization would suggest, it is crucial that we reaffirm the heuristic potential of ethnicity. It is this potential that compels us to describe the complex boundaries between groups: boundaries that are constructed, to be sure, but were and are constructed by all groups concerned, both in the past and today; boundaries that must be described as completely as possible, ceasing once and for all to oppose the ethnic to the social, as is done so often. There is no question that ethnic relations are social relations; indeed, F. Barth has shown the importance of recalling that ethnic boundaries are intrinsically social, writing that “ethnic distinctions do not depend on the absence of social interactions and social acceptance but are on the contrary the very foundations on which more inclusive social systems are built”<sup>31</sup>. The process of social dichotomization or what Barth calls “ethnic boundaries” thus lies at the heart of our approach. If these boundaries have now become socially relevant to the point of channeling social life and to some extent structuring the relationships between the individuals and the groups produced by the boundaries themselves, it is because both sides contributed in the past to building these boundaries, asymmetrically to be sure, and that this asymmetry continues to be kept alive (materially and symbolically) by historical, political, economical and cultural barriers and productions.

We are currently moving towards a better understanding of the “institutional construction of ethnicity”<sup>32</sup>, in other words, the way that institutions (schools, the State, the administration, political parties, the media and so on) and public policies help create ethnicity and can for that reason be considered ethnic actors (Martiniello, 1998; Geisser, 1999; Bastenier, 2004). Our task today is to understand minority groups as actors in their own right within these ethnic boundaries, not merely as the objects of ethnic categorization. A. Bastenier rightly pointed out that “descriptions of minority groups as ethnic actors and not ethnic victims are rare and amount to demonstrating the danger of the ethnicization of society (Islamization; the spread of community groups; the rapid decline of secularism, even in schools, etc.; terrorist threats)”. In the French context, remarks like this are doubly “politically incorrect”: not only do they diverge from anti-discrimination rhetoric but if read hastily could be mistakenly construed to condone renewed leanings towards a culturalist account.

Thanks to M. Weber (1995, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1922) and recent reviews of his work (Juteau, 1999; Winter, 2004), we know that ethnic constructions bestow status and meaning and that they are part of the differentiation and hierarchization process that characterizes every social order. From an economic standpoint, ethnicity is frequently instrumentalized in situations of ethnic entrepreneurialism or in market “niches”. From a political standpoint, it is sometimes used as a weapon to mobilize a community or an electoral constituency. These occurrences notwithstanding, ethnicity cannot be equated with a mere front for mobilization purposes. Ethnicity does not develop in a cultural void or in the absence of identity: material dealings

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<sup>30</sup> See the journal *Ethnicity* since 1976.

<sup>31</sup> F. Barth, “Les groupes ethniques et leurs frontières”, in P. Poutignat and J. Streiff-Fenart (1995), p. 212.

<sup>32</sup> For recent French contributions, see V. de Rudder et al. (2000), F. Lorcerie (2003) and V. Geisser (1999).

sustain its symbolic and ideational constructions in what Juteau, inverting the well-known expression of Maurice Godelier, has called “the real within the ideal” (1999: 77).

What are the material and symbolic interactions that cause ethnicity to flourish? We can observe them in the living conditions of those who produce and transmit a tangible feeling of belonging to a group (a “community” in modern parlance). These material dealings are not frozen configurations that encumber minority groups alone. Rather they are dynamic and relational events that show how majority and minority groups interact and define each other, leaving their members to ensure the enduring transmission of ethnic boundaries that are more elastic than either side cares to admit. D. Juteau describes this transmission as a long process of socialization in which women play a central role. It is mainly women who physically nurture the youngest members of the group within the heart of the family structure; it is mainly women who impart the group’s collective project by teaching children how to act, to be and to think. Within the sphere of family life, children are taught cooking, are read bedtime stories, are exposed to different foods and tastes, are imparted core values through folksongs or domestic traditions: family life operates as a kind of ethnic factory turning out future men and women. For through its substantive culture, this education transmits the group’s posture or, if we prefer, the asymmetrical nature of its relations to the other group or groups, relations which it must oppose symbolically and against which it must define itself materially. A universal social relation, ethnicity is thus inseparable from the humanization (not to say ethnicization) of individuals and groups that always thrive within a specific cultural environment, regardless of the status that culture enjoys. Ethnicity is also etched in the institutions of the majority group and can be gleaned in its public policies.

For individual and collective actors alike, ethnic constructions are one of many enframings through which we can understand reality: they are a dimension of our identity and one in a range of alternative modes of relating to the world. While ethnic constructions are necessarily imbedded in gender and class relations, it remains possible for the researcher to discern and analyze them separately. There is no doubt that current usages of “ethnicization” are constituents of the interethnic phenomena scholars wish to understand and that they merit serious study. It could be that in studying them, others will find, as we have done, that these usages are evidence of a majoritarian attempt to countervail a theoretical malaise and ratify an asymmetrical and normative interpretation of ethnic relations.

Author’s note: All translations of French citations in this text are ours.

**Commentaire [J2]** : L’alternat  
if est de mettre « translations  
ours » après chaque instance.